

FreshWater Watch is led by Earthwatch, which provides testing kits for community groups worldwide. CRKC started a citizen science programme in 2022, and added Freshwater Watch to the programme last summer. We have over 40 volunteers who between them are testing every month at 22 locations on the river Kent and its main tributaries. The aim is to continue this for 12 months, so we have results for every season - and every weather condition!

Anne Blackburn has been a Freshwater Watch nutrient tester and a Clean River Kent Campaign volunteer since the beginning. Anne spoke to us about what interested her in joining Freshwater Watch and what she has achieved so far.

What inspired you to become involved with FreshWater Watch?

I have always been interested in wildlife and conservation. I have a biology degree and have worked in environmental education for most of my career. However, it was walking along the River Kent regularly (every day during lockdown) and seeing that it is being affected by pollution made me want to help before it is too late.

Can you share how you became part of this programme?

I can't remember where I heard about the campaign but it was probably on Facebook. I attended an early meeting of the group and volunteered to do some monitoring.

Could you describe your role as a Freshwater Tester? What exactly are you monitoring? We are monitoring the phosphates and nitrates in the river water. Me and another volunteer go to the river once a month and do some simple chemical and visual tests on the river water. We upload our results to an app where they are stored along with all the other results from testers on different sites along the river. Hopefully this will build a picture of the state of the river as it flows through the various settlements along the banks. We also record the state of the river, the wildlife around, people using the river and any obvious source of pollution.

How does our local river hold significance for you?

The river is part of why I love living where I do. I walk or cycle along part of it on most days and enjoy watching the wildlife whether it is common species or rarer creatures such as kingfishers, dippers and the occasional otter. I feel a responsibility to protect it for future generations.

How do you think citizen science initiatives like FreshWater Watch play a part in wider efforts to protect our environment?

It raises awareness of the problems facing our natural world and makes people feel that individual actions can make a difference.

What improvements would you like to witness in our rivers?

Less pollution from all sources resulting in a return to healthy river systems across the country. Monitoring by the Environment Agency followed by action against polluters.

How do you think your involvement in the program has impacted your understanding of freshwater ecosystems?

Not as much as it should. I think I need to learn more about the testing we are doing and what it will reveal.

Any words of encouragement for individuals interested in joining FreshWater Watch or the Clean River Kent Campaign?

It's great fun to be involved in and to feel you are doing something positive for the local environment.